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from the office of
Senator Edward M. Kennedy
of Massachusetts

REMARKS OF SENATOR EDWARD M. KENNEDY
COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES
CAPE COD COMMUNITY COLLEGE
WEST BARNSTABLE, MASSACHUSETTS

JUNE 3, 1986

President Hall, Sister Kathleen Harrington, Dorothy O'Donnell, and most of all, members of the graduating class, family and friends.

I have a special affection for this college because it was founded in 1961, the same year my brother Jack took office as President of the United States. In a sense, Four C's is a symbol of his New Frontier, opening new horizons and bringing the possibilities of higher education and continuing education within reach of thousands of citizens of all ages in the community.

I know that if President Kennedy were here today, he would be as proud of your success as I am. His wish for Cape Cod Community College would be the same as mine in this silver anniversary year -- you have had an outstanding 25 years, and may the next 25 years be even greater than the first.

I also want to acknowledge the wise counsel I have received in the Congress from many of you here and from other leaders in education in the Commonwealth. Nothing has brought me greater satisfaction in my years in the Senate than my work on the Education Subcommittee -- and the progress we have made in bringing high quality, accessible, and affordable higher education to the people of America.

The community college movement is as important to the 20th century United States as the land grant college movement was to American agriculture in the 19th century. Democracy in America depends upon democracy in education; the opportunity for a decent education must never be priced beyond the budget of any student of any age who is able and willing to learn.

And so I say to those of little faith in high places, to the short-sighted officials in government who shortchange student education in the morning and then complain about welfare mothers in the afternoon -- heed the words of the ancient Chinese proverb: "Give people a fish, and they will have a single meal; but teach them how to fish, and they will eat all their lives."

And I also say to them -- if you are willing to act on that philosophy of preparing for the future, if you want to see what a second chance can do, if you want to know where tickets out of poverty are purchased, if you want to find learning bringing hope to people's lives, breaking the age-old cycle of unemployment and dependence, then come to Four C's and see what is happening in education in America.

We have not won all of our budget battles in Congress. But we have made some worthwhile progress. Earlier this spring, for the first time in the Reagan years, the United States Senate said "yes" to increased funding for education, and "no" to higher spending by the Pentagon.

I intend to do all I can to see that this precedent becomes a pattern. There is no justification for misguided budget priorities that neglect our classrooms here on earth while lavishing billions of tax dollars on Star Wars in the sky. And aiding contras in Central America is no substitute for aiding our own students in Middle America who are reaching for the dream of higher education.

I reject the view that the richest land on earth cannot afford to educate its people, feed its hungry, house its homeless and care for the sick and the elderly with dignity and decency.

I am tired of talk from those in power who believe in rugged individualism -- so long as it is rugged on someone else and comfortable for themselves. As I have said on other occasions, this Administration must love poor people, because it is creating so many of them.

For all of you who are graduating today, I congratulate you on reaching this threshold to the future. You did not make the world you live in, but you have the chance to change it. As my brother Robert Kennedy liked to say, it is the individual who makes the difference. He told the students in South Africa on his visit there in 1966:

> Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

People today are not asking much from government. They are asking for the simple things that make a difference in their lives. They want jobs where they can work, not lines at the local welfare or unemployment office. They want homes with mortgages their budgets can afford. They want schools that teach their children how to read. They want health care to be a basic right for all, not just an expensive privilege for the few. They want safe streets where they can walk at night, instead of barricading their homes against the rising tide of crime.

The real genius of our nation has been the willingness of individuals to get involved themselves, to work for change, to try to make a difference. At times like this in other years, the country has often drawn inspiration from its youth.

One of the finest chapters in the history of our involvement in Vietnam was written by the millions of young men and women who first saw the truth about the war and persuaded America to turn back. One of the finest chapters in the recent history of civil rights was written by the youth of America and the freedom riders of the early 1960's. One of the finest chapters in America's concern for the impoverished people of the world was written by young persons in the Peace Corps overseas and in our public service programs here at home.

You don't have to be a President or a Senator to make things change. In our country today and in nations throughout the world, Americans are doing many worthwhile things. Physicians and nurses are bringing health care to people and places that never had a doctor. Teachers are bringing knowledge to children who never had a school. Lawyers are bringing legal services to people too poor to know their rights. Business men and women are bringing new enterprises to the city ghetto and rural farm, and helping to end the ancient curse of poverty and neglect.

And today, in all of these endeavors, there are unparalleled opportunities for women as well as men. For the women graduating today, the possibilities are especially great. There has never been a better or more hopeful time for a young woman to grow up in the history of our country. This Administration may have temporarily blocked the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, but no Administration can stop the movement for equal rights.

A year from now, the nation will be celebrating the bicentennial of the most important event in our history -- the achievement that made all our other progress possible -- the creation of the Constitution, the miracle of 1787.

The constitutional ideas of majority rule, protection of minorities, equality of citizens, and limits on the power of government are as old as Magna Carta -- and as current as democracy in the Philippines and the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa.

But few, if any, of the great documents in the history of government stand taller than the American Constitution. And none in use today has endured longer. Virtually every nation in the world -- over 160 now in all -- have constitutions, and three-quarters of them have been drafted since 1970.

The genius of our own Constitution, Paul Freund has said, is that it is both Newtonian and Darwinian -- Newtonian, in the sense of action and reaction, checks and balances; Darwinian, in the sense that it is organic and evolving. It is sad that, after two centuries of brilliant evolution, we have an Attorney General of the United States in 1986 who seems to think that the Constitution stopped growing in 1787.

Mr. Ed Meese is entitled to his own idiosyncratic views about the original intent of the framers of the Constitution. But he is not entitled to stack the federal courts with judicial nominees who hew to that discredited ideological line.

The challenge we face in the coming year is to create more than just another happy celebration for the bicentennial. It is to revitalize our Constitution for the future, by providing the country and our people with a deeper understanding of its contemporary role in the light of the two hundred years of our experience.

Again and again over the past two centuries the Constitution has demonstrated a formidable ability to respond to challenges from any source -- whether from the militant rivalry of totalitarian regimes, the more friendly competition of parliamentary democracies, or the assault of economic forces that would mire us in depression and stagnation.

As we enter this period of constitutional commemoration, I hope that the country as a whole and each of us as citizens will give greater thought to ways in which our founding document and our present institutions fulfill the freedoms that shape our lives.

Cape Cod and the other community colleges in the Commonwealth are well-suited to take the lead in this endeavor. Plymouth Colony was the earliest example of self-government in the New World, and the Mayflower Compact, the precursor of the Constitution, was signed a few miles from where we meet.

The success of the bicentennial will depend on the broad involvement of both the public and private sectors, including community groups, business and labor organizations, schools and colleges, and above all, individual citizens and families like yourselves.

No single prescription would serve America better in meeting the complex challenges that lie ahead in foreign and domestic policy than a back-to-basics continuing education course in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. We owe at least this much to the next generation, who will be responsible for the Constitution in the next century.

The rise of selfish single-issue interest groups, the power of their aggressive lobbying, and the corrosive influence of their massive campaign contributions are among the most alarming trends I see in modern public life. They feed on public apathy. They distort the balance of democracy, and dispel the atmosphere of tolerance and conciliation in which government must function if it is to advance the public interest.

Superfund legislation to clean up toxic waste has been stalled for months by tactics of this sort. It is bad enough that the polluters have poisoned our neighborhoods and our ground water with their toxic dumps; it is even worse that they are poisoning our political process by blocking action on the clean-up.

Tomorrow in the Senate, we begin a far-reaching debate on comprehensive reform of our loophole-ridden tax laws. It has been said that no one fears more for the future of the country than a taxpayer about to lose his loophole. Because of the power of well-heeled special interests, the Senate has often been the graveyard of tax reform, and the lobbyists are poised to do their work again. But this time, the momentum is on our side, and a fair tax code is at last in sight. Generations of suffering taxpayers have paid too much, because of loopholes that permit the wealthy few to pay too little. Now, with your support, we intend to close as many loopholes as we can, and use the revenues saved to reduce tax rates for all Americans.

It is also time for progress on other items on our agenda, including a new assault on the ancient evils of hunger, poverty, illiteracy and disease, so that this rich land never again disgraces itself by ignoring the invisible millions in our midst who deserve our help the most.

If our resources are to be equal to the task, we will need public leaders willing to challenge powerful private interests -- and citizens willing to support them and elect them when they do. Without that public participation and commitment, the Constitution becomes just another fading parchment under glass, instead of the fighting faith that has vitalized and revitalized our democracy through so many generations.

For many of you, there will be opportunities for public service, and I hope that you will accept them and embrace them when they come. Whatever challenges you face, I urge you to meet them in the spirit of the old Irish prayer:

Take time to work; it is the price of success.

Take time to think; it is the source of power.

Take time to play; it is the secret of perpetual youth.

Take time to read; it is the foundation of wisdom.

Take time to make friends; it is the road to happiness.

Take time to love and be loved; it is the privilege of God.

Take time to share; life is too short to be selfish.

Take time to laugh; laughter is the music of God.

Finally, remember one other thing. It is the sacrifices of the past that have created the possibilities of the present. Be thankful for your teachers here, and for the knowledge you have gained. Be grateful for the efforts of your parents and your families, especially for the sacrifices they have made to bring you to this day.

Above all, because much has been given to you, be worthy of your stewardship, and the promise of this land. In whatever ways you can, in the many enterprises that await you, I hope that you will also do your best to make a difference for others, because in doing so, you will give something back to America in return for all it has given you.

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